

THE LAO NEW YEAR

by

Vongchanh

New year is a happy time for people all over the world and different people celebrate their New Years on different times and they have different kinds of festivities. There are reasons why people pick a certain time to celebrate their New Years.

Christians count their years according to the birth of Christ. They call the time before the birth of Christ, B.C. and the time after, A.D. They celebrate their New Year on the 1st of January of each year.

I think it would be useful to explain first the reason of the anomaly that we celebrate our New Year in April of the Western calendar. New Year festivities are better known to Lao people as the 5th month festival. In fact, the first month of the lunar year does not correspond to the month of April of the Western calendar but December. "In deciding to delay by several months, the opening of the official year, the Horas's idea was to place the New Year under more favorable auspices. From the zodiacal sign Thanu, 2 nights become longer to the detriment of days and consequently lead the world towards darkness, and symbolically to unhappiness.

On the contrary, from the Rasi Met 3 which correspond to the 5th month of the lunar calendar, days get longer and longer to the detriment of nights, till the Rasi phrusop 4 and the Methun. 5 Thus, a year beginning in April offers excellent prospects of brightness and prosperity." 6 We Lao people count our years by 12, this is taken from the Chinese Year Designations, which is a cycle and are represented by the names of 12 different animals; rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, chicken, dog, pig.

This is the table of the Lao Year Designation:

Rat	1900	1912	1924	1936	1948	1960
Cow	1901	1913	1925	1937	1949	1961
Tiger	1902	1914	1926	1938	1950	1962
Rabbit	1903	1915	1927	1939	1951	1963
Dragon	1904	1916	1928	1940	1952	1964
Snake	1905	1917	1929	1941	1953	1965
Horse	1906	1918	1930	1942	1954	1966
Goat	1907	1919	1931	1943	1955	1967
Monkey	1908	1920	1932	1944	1956	1968
Chicken	1909	1921	1933	1945	1957	1969
Dog	1910	1922	1934	1946	1958	1970
Pig	1911	1923	1935	1947	1959	1971

The Lao ancient Lao genius realized the coincidence of choosing the beginning of a year in April, which is in the 5th lunar year, so they decided to celebrate New Year in April.

According to the geographical location and the weather of Laos, it is really a very fortunate coincidence to celebrate our New Year in April. Because this is the time of the rebirth of nature; trees, flowers and grass begin to spring up and turn green again after many months of heat and drought. Farmers begin to plow their fields which have been laid bare for a long period, and scatter rice seeds when the earth is wet enough from the rainfalls. It is therefore the general rejoicings that the ritual feasts are celebrated through out the Laotian countryside.

On the last day of the closing year, people all get ready to welcome the coming New Year. They get their houses thoroughly cleaned and put in order so as to drive the evil spirits, that have hidden in the house somewhere, out of the house so that the whole family can live happily through the coming year.

On the first day of New Year, the monks in the temples take the statues of Buddha out of the temple buildings and place them on the temple ground. On this very day, hundreds of people go to the temples in order to sprinkle Buddha's images. They bring with them buckets filled with clean water that has the smell of flowers dissolved in it. They bow before the images of Buddha, sprinkle them with lustral water and pray that the coming year will bring them health, wealth and happiness. Then they collect the water that runs down from the statues of Buddha for some purpose. They believe that is the holy water.

People like to visit their friends and relatives on this day. They drink, sing and dance to enjoy themselves fully. High officials take this opportunity to celebrate their remarkable success during the past years.

The subsequent days are devoted to various forms of rejoicings. People enjoy themselves day and night; in the day time, they all fool around with water. On both sides of the streets, people stand with barrels of water in order to pour it on the ones passing by. Boys and girls throw water generously on each other. It is a general belief that by throwing and sprinkling on each other on New Year's day will wash out the sins for each other. When people throw water on you, it really means they like you and wish you good luck, so in return you are supposed to say, "Kop Chai".⁷ But in recent years, most people just take this for fun. Some don't even know why they throw water on New Year's day. A number of people use trucks filled with water barrels in order to throw water on people walking in the streets and they pay little attention to the cleanliness of water they use. This causes some traffic accidents each year. So now, it is forbidden by the government to drive a car or truck with water barrels for this purpose.

Children also have lots of fun playing around with their soaked clothes on, using squirt guns to squirt water at one another. You seldom see a person walking in the street (who is not getting soaked).

At night, people put on their gorgeous clothes and go to parties, movies and wherever they can have fun, because they don't have to worry about getting their nice clothes all wet. It is against the law to throw water on people at night. On these few days of New Year, most schools and institutions hold dancing parties to celebrate. So, there are lots of parties people can go to and have fun.

After three days of rejoicing, as these festivities draw to an end, small mounds of sand shaped like pyramids are erected both in the temples grounds and on the banks of the Mekong River. They are decorated with paper streamers, ornamented with zodiacal signs. Their builders beg gods to grant the favor of long life, of wonderful days filled with happiness and wealth as numerous as the sands they are made of.

But, it is at Luang Prabang that the New Year festivities are at their brightest. May be it is because Luang Prabang is the home of the King. The New Year spreads over two full weeks and besides the various ceremonies which have been described above, they are marked by numerous festivities. People buy live animals in the market and set them free. They believe by doing this kind deed will lead them toward heaven after they die.

The King has a big party in his palace to celebrate New Year. He invites all the noble people to come and celebrate together. He visits different temples to sprinkle water on the images of Buddha. On this occasion, crowds of people mass along the route to sprinkle the king with scented water before he gets to the temples and on his way home.

Then comes the dance of Pou Gneu Gna Gneu, i.e. The first male and female Laotian ancestors. The two dancers wear masks and a coat ornamented with bright colors. They dance and present best wishes to all the Laotians for the past, present and future. On the 9th day of the New Year, the king and Queen give their offering to the monks and entertain them at a banquet in the Royal Palace.

Lao New Year retains its deeply religious characteristics and is celebrated in an atmosphere of joy and brotherhood. On this occasion, it is the special wish of Lao people to see everyone participate in the general rejoicing without any distinction of race or origin. If anyone does not have respect for on the Lao customs and he takes offence at the shower that is kindly sprinkled on him it will raise the anger of Lao people.

We are very happy that a good many foreign people who live in Laos, participate in celebrating our New Year. They go to our New Year parties. They throw water on other people and get all soaked while walking in the streets without getting mad. This shows that people can always get along at any time, any place if one respects an other's customs and beliefs and dignifies one another.